

Out in the West Texas Town of El Paso

By Annabeth Balance

Editor's note: Helen was three years old when her parents divorced and her mother took the three children to El Paso, Texas. For the most part, it was a happy childhood for Helen: she remembers it as being poor, but never deprived. There was always food on the table - often macaroni and cheese casserole. Helen told me that she was eleven years old before she discovered that other folks put meat in their tacos. Here, Helen's sister Annabeth (nee Annie) recalls those years in El Paso.

Setting the scene, Mama¹ had taken us three kids and left Daddy² in about February of 1947. She had saved up a thousand dollars [she later told us] from her "household spending money" during the last few years up at the mine. During the war years (1942-1945) there were restrictions on everything, most especially on gasoline and tires. So any sort of travel was exceedingly rare. And everything else was restricted too; plus Daddy was staying in Silver City with Eva a lot of the time, and so Mama really didn't have that much trouble saving money — there was nothing "extraneous" to spend it on!

I had not been uphappy with life up at the mine prior to moving to El Paso, but as isolated as we were, it could be a bit boring. Did you ever see the place where we lived up on the hill between two of the mines that Daddy supervised in Santa Rita, NM?

It was just four frame houses, painted green with white trim, built and placed there by the Dodge-Phelps mining company as residences for the top few officials for the mines. It was Daddy (Superintendent), Ivan (Somebody) as Bookkeeper, Gary Rickman as Mechanical Engineer, and our Uncle Bob Raines (husband of Mama's sister Nina) as chief electrician. There was a simple two-strand barbed wire fence that enclosed an area that may have been five acres or so — all just bare native scrub brush and wire-stiff grasses. The fence was minimal at best — sort of a "suggestion" to keep wild donkeys from wandering into the area I think. And we were of course NEVER to go outside of that fence!

Daddy had had pipelines installed to bring mine water over to the houses to use for toilets and gardening, but we couldn't drink it — we had huge bottles of water delivered and placed in a dispensing stand for drinking and cooking. Daddy also had electricity furnished to the houses by way of a generator that was located near the houses, and it was always getting hit by

¹ Helen Elizabeth "Betty" Brand Faust Muller, 1913-1979, FGM 74097841.

² Jerry Willard Faust II, 1912-1966, FGM 78350861.

lightning in the storms (we were at about 7000 feet altitude.) And then of course they had laid sewer lines to carry all the waste water away from the houses. That was easy — we were perched on the side of a hill that extended a mile or so down to the little town of Hanover, NM — no problem with drainage!

There was, I hope you can see, absolutely nothing to do there. In the mornings, we would have breakfast, and Mama would send us out “to play”. She would call us in to get a drink of water every now and then, and call us in for lunch, and make us take a nap in the afternoon and then back out to play till dinner time. I have no idea how we filled our time. I was terminally bored the entire time.

There were a few other kids there — I guess that’s how we spent our time. The Rickmans had a boy about Jerry’s age; and Aunt Nina had several kids — first Bob who was maybe 1-2 years younger than Jerry, then Alan a year or so after that, then a daughter Jodie, and then a 4th kid who I don’t remember.

Anyway, one day there was some great excitement! Somebody (probably either our cousin Bob or the Rickman kid) came excitedly to tell us that they had found a swimming hole that we could go get in and cool off! Wow! None of us had ever known of such a thing around there, so we hurried off with the “messenger” to see what this marvelous pastime would look like.

Uh-oh! It was OTL - Outside The Fence! But — heck, that fence was totally simple to get through, so we did it. And there, just a little way down the hill was indeed this sort of pond of water! So we probably took off our shoes, but likely nothing more, and waded in to it. It was sort of murky, but nothing around there was particularly “nice”, so that didn’t bother us any.

Well, we were having a lovely time playing around there, when one or more of the mothers must have missed us, and they came looking for us. (There’s always a downside to any time you’re having fun, right?) They were FURIOUS at us! WAY more than seemed reasonable, even in view of the fact that we had gone Outside The Fence. We all got hauled home hastily and bathed and fussed over something fierce. It was all quite beyond anything that made sense to us.

It was only years later that I learned that the lovely “swimming hole” we were frolicking away was in fact the cesspool where all of the raw, totally untreated sewage for all four houses drained to!

But now, it is 1947, and we were off to El Paso. Mama took us to El Paso because she had been born there and that is where her mother³ was, and where she had gone to school, etc. Among her acquaintances was a woman named Mary Shacklette⁴ who was a realtor, and apparently Mama had been in communication with Mary for some time about all of this. Housing was extremely tight, and it was definitely a sellers' market, but Mama's cash availability for the down payment made a substantial difference in the search. So Mary found a house for us and got it all signed, sealed and delivered, and we were ready to move.

Mama packed us up in her little blue Plymouth coupe (it must have been jam-packed!) and soon we were in our new home. I have no idea how she managed furnishing it, but she did — we were not in a bare space or any such thing.

It was a real adobe house, with those thick walls — 2 bedrooms, 1 bath, living room, kitchen - and a front porch that we kids treated like our very own space!

So what does a newly-divorced woman do, who has three children to feed and support, and absolutely zero work experience? Her college degree held very little value when contrasted with the male war vets looking for jobs.

Well, she was quite adept at handling words, coming from a family full of women writers.

While still in New Mexico ("up at the mine") during the war, she would write many entries in these "25-words-or-less" contests. In these events, the sponsoring agency would identify the particular item that they wanted the contestants to write about, and in "25 words or less" tell why that product was superior in some way. The sponsor would award perhaps one grand prize, 2 or 3 runner-up prizes and 5-10 honorable mentions, with monetary amounts of maybe \$100 to \$500, \$20-\$40, and \$1-\$10 respectively. These were usually nation-wide and heavily entered, and the sponsors would then use all these contest entries to develop their own advertising materials.

Mama was quite good at these things, and she won many prizes. One such prize was the diamond ring that she paired up with some other stones to provide the rings she gave to Helen and to me for our high school graduations. There was another contest in which the contestants were to choose between two different products as the target of their entry, and the top prize in each group would be the award of that appliance. The two

³ Anna Brand, author of "*Thunder Before Seven*"

⁴ Mary *Hudnall* Shacklette, 1898-1979, FGM 145548457

appliances (I think the sponsor was General Electric) were an electric stove and a refrigerator. So Mama worked on it a bit and fired off what she thought was a really good entry, focused on the electric stove. And then, just after she mailed it off, she thought “Oh no! I don’t want that! I NEED a new refrigerator!” So she really sat down and worked up a new entry, for a fridge, and sure enough, she won it!

So, armed with these results as her portfolio, she applied for work in various advertising situations, and was hired at the major department store in downtown El Paso. And later she moved over to writing ads for a radio station, and then further moved into selling the ad time for the station (where with her commissions she made considerably more than the salaries at the other two positions.)

[Editor’s inquiry: During my early years of marriage to Helen, she would often tell the story of growing up poor in El Paso, and how she was hit by a car at about age 5, and that it left her ear “hanging by a thread” according to her mother. Then one time Mama came to visit, Helen reminded her of this story, and Mama snorted, “Hanging by a thread? Ha! You had a little tear on your ear!” What could be the story behind the story? Annabeth responds:]

Our house that Mama found with the help of Mary Shacklette was located on Altura Boulevard, a moderately busy street that intersected with a fairly major street (began with a C I think – N. Copia Street?) a couple of blocks down the way. There were several other families with kids on our block — I can think of 5 right now — but I cannot think of who it was that Helen liked to go play with on the other side of the street. Anyway, it was our job (Jerry and me) to be available to take Helen safely across whenever she wanted to go over there or to come home.

I’m sure you can hear it now — us grouching at having to be around to take her across when she wanted to go play with her friend; and then listen for her to call us when she was over there, ready to come home.

Daddy was (as I imagine you have heard in other contexts) exceedingly uncommunicative with us or with Mama, and he always wanted to be treated like royalty whenever he did have anything to do with us. Once in a while he would show up, unannounced of course, and throw everyone (i.e., Mama) into a tizzy. She was always afraid that he would do something to take us away from her — I have no idea whether that was a realistic fear or not, but it was constantly in her mind.

Jerry was always glad to see Daddy when he would come, I was always irritated at his intrusion into what my day was, and quite distant toward him.

But Helen was totally gaga when he would be there. (I was 10-11 years old at that time, Jerry was 9-10, and Helen was barely out of babyhood, 3-4.)

So on this one day, Daddy showed up, and the standard commotion ensued, and everybody forgot that Helen was across the street at her friend's house. When she realized what was happening, she of course started calling for someone to come help her across the street, but nobody heard her at all — probably all in the house by then or some such. So after waiting what must have felt like twenty years to her, she just decided to try it by herself. Well, there were cars parked along the side of the street, and a pretty constant level of traffic both directions, with no crosswalk for a couple of blocks either direction. So, sure enough, she stepped out, way too small for drivers to see her as she came from the yard to the street, and someone did in fact hit her. The driver stopped and was horrified, and everyone came rushing out of the house, and there really WAS commotion then!

Helen was crying, the driver was apologizing, Mama was mad at Jerry and me, and Daddy was trying to make it all Mama's fault any way he could.

Helen's ear really was hurt and bleeding where her head had hit the pavement, and I guess it was a trip to the ER or doctor's office — probably the latter. We did have a very reliable family doctor, which was really good! i don't remember who went on the emergency run, but i'm pretty sure Jerry and I stayed back at the house. When everybody was back, Helen was indeed the queen of the day, and Daddy went home (maybe a 3 hour drive back to the mine) and everyone was quite happy to call it a day.

As to any after-the-fact discussion of the severity of the injury — I think it was severe enough to have warranted the care and attention that it got — seems to me she had stitches that had to be removed after the passage of time. And you know how stories get revised to suit the current time and attitude in future re-tellings! And you certainly know the personalities of Mama and Helen!

I loved our little house on Altura in El Paso. Those big thick adobe walls kept the house really cool in the summer time (when we kids were home more than during school-time). And the walls being so thick, they provided really wide window-sill space, which was wonderful for propping up a book and reading in comfort, or storing whatever items you might be playing with, to keep them out of the way of the other kids.

One thing that we all got a kick out of was using the open window as a conduit for our cat Butchie to go in and out. We had never heard of such a thing as a doggy-door of course, so we just thought we had invented the best

thing since sliced bread. Jerry was the most effective at it — he would call Butchie from wherever he was in the other rooms of the house, and cajole him to jump through the window to get outside. And then it would take some work, but Jerry would get him to come on back through the window to come inside again (usually bribed with a bit of cat food probably!)

But the crowning glory (to Jerry) and the horrendous travesty (to me) and the everlasting delight (to Helen) was the day that Jerry was “working” Butchie back & forth through the window, to the point that the cat really seemed to be getting into it himself, and so the grand finale was set: Butchie was inside the house, Jerry was at the window calling him to come and jump, and Butchie did in fact come RUNNING— and Jerry quickly slammed the window shut and Butchie hit it head on in mid flight, and Jerry was absolutely delighted. I of course was horrified.

Money was tight, no question, and Mama was exceedingly careful in how she parsed out our (I guess meager) income to cover our expenses.

When we were little, Mama always gave us a weekly allowance. It was very little, but we were always tutored on money management issues, urging us to save part of it to collect up for something “big”, and then spend the remainder on whatever we cared to. The amount was geared somewhat to our ages, and what each of us was interested in.

Jerry & I were considered the “same” age, and Helen was “the younger one”. I am imagining that our allowances were in the range of 25-35 cents (remember the years now!), and Helen’s would have been 10-15 cents less.

OK, fine. I dutifully saved part of my allowances and bought things I wanted for school; Jerry did a lot of model airplane things with his. But Helen would go straight to the grocery store that was on the way from our house to the school, and she would spend her **WHOLE ALLOWANCE** on one or more bags of candy corn (or some other bag of candies or gum). I of course was appalled, and tried (since I of course considered myself to be “in charge of her” when we were not with Mama!) to talk her out of such rampant hedonism.

But what I did not know until much later was what she did with those bags of candies. She would take a bag to school (which was questionable in itself); she would open it up (!!!) and have all of the candies out separate, and **SELL** them individually to the other kids in her class.

Of course she probably tripled her initial investment (or more), but I was simply mortified when I learned of this “shameful” behavior!

Mama was delighted of course.

Gee, I wonder how she came to have all of the businesses she did there in Albuquerque??!!

From an early age, Mama made certain that I knew what our family finances were and how they were handled, and how she made financial decisions as they came up.

But we always had food in the house, we were well clothed and had our health taken care of. There were the annual seasons of household panic as Mama would struggle to collect all the beginning-of-school-year necessities such as new shoes, school clothes, and classroom supplies for 3 kids, but I have no doubt that the same thing was going on in the homes of 90% of our classmates.

Looking back on it, I am thoroughly amazed that Mama was as able to provide for us as she was. It was after all, just after WWII; the GIs were all coming home and taking jobs, and a (gasp!) woman, who was (double gasp!) unmarried, was WAY down the list of interesting potential employees for most establishments. Daddy was supposed to pay a certain amount each month in child support, but many months he did not do it, or did not do it on time, so whatever Mama was making was not enough to cover our total expenses. On several occasions she had to call the court where the divorce was granted, and have the judge take some sort of action (usually informal, sometimes formal) to get the payments coming again.

Mama was often commenting on our financial limitations, so I guess that would lend a sense of being “poor”, but that is not how I tended to think of it. I just took all of that as reasonable cautions on family behaviors.

Her real “coup” came when she was desperately trying to find a bigger house, so all 3 of us kids would not have to be in the same bedroom. There was a lot of new-home construction happening in the late 40s/early 50s, but the problem was getting the financing. A great deal the housing being built was financed through the GI Bill. Well that cut her out of the whole thing from the get-go.

During this time since the divorce, Mama began to do a little bit of dating. And then there was this one guy who seemed to be getting pretty serious with her and vice versa. He seemed to be “older” than her, but heck — they were all “old” people, right? So, in time, they were in fact married, in the Presbyterian Church in the area called Five Points (does every town or city need to have one of those?). And soon after that, Mama said that she had found a new house for us, with 3 bedrooms and a lot more space than this one we had been living in for 3-4 years now. It was located a couple of miles away from this first one, just outside the south gate of Fort Bliss, on Wainwright street.

So we moved to our brand-spanking-new home in the summer of 1950 or ‘51. But just about the time we moved in, Mama and her new husband got a divorce! I was quite taken aback, but they said they had just discovered that they didn’t really care for one another like they thought they would; and they were parting as good friends. It all seemed weird to me, but I was mostly involved with just trying to make my own way through life.

And, in a strange little way, there seemed to be a general attitude of irritation or non-acceptance toward us from our new neighbors that I had not felt in the old neighborhood. When I did get around to mentioning it to Mama, she said that it might be due to her being (again) a single woman, and (that being the early 50s of course) put her terribly at odds with the general expectations for a “proper family”.

It was only years later that someone pointed out to me that that man Mama had married was doing us all a huge favor. He was not planning to utilize his GI Bill loan feature, so he agreed to marry Mama in order for her to use that means to buy this house that she wanted us to have, and then just be divorced and both go on their separate ways. And the antagonism that we felt from the neighborhood was them questioning how she could have gotten this house that was in this totally GI-Bill-financed subdivision!

That man’s name was James Edward Taylor, and he went by the nickname of his initials — JET. Such a generous act JET did for us.

Editor’s notes re “Mama”: **Helen Elizabeth “Betty” BRAND** was born on 22 Mar 1913 in EL Paso, El Paso Co, TX. Betty attended public schools in El Paso, and graduated about Jun 1935 from Texas College of Mines (later UTEP), El Paso, TX (BA in Liberal Arts). Betty really wanted to go to Law School, but this was the Depression era; no money. She was

deeply disappointed she was not able to. Following her graduation from college and a brief teaching career, Betty married Jerry Faust II, a mining engineer, and lived in NM for eight years. She returned to El Paso in 1946, was active in community affairs, and was a much sought-after public speaker. She supported her family with a career in advertising, as a protegee of the late Mary Shaklette in real estate and in banking, in El Paso and later in Southern California (where she lived with her second husband, Art Muller).

When Betty left the mine in 1947, she went to work for KEPO radio station in El Paso, writing the segues for radio announcers at a time when it was difficult for anyone to get a job, let alone a woman. She convinced them by saying she would work on commission only. Although she finally moved to Tucson for health reasons, El Paso remained the family home. She succumbed to a long battle with emphysema and died on 22 Feb 1978 in Tucson, AZ. A quiet memorial service was held in Tucson for Betty on 26 Feb 1979.

Editor's notes re "Daddy": **Jerry Williard FAUST Jr.** was born on 8 Jun 1912 in Ft. Bliss, El Paso, TX. He graduated about Jun 1934 from Texas School of Mines, El Paso, TX (Mining Engineering). Jerry did some graduate work at Texas Western also, but did not receive a graduate degree. Then off to work at Terlingua, Mexico for 2-3 years, then got the job in Silver City with same company (Illinois Zinc) that he stayed with for his mining career. Quickly moved up in management, to general manager of all three mines Illinois Zinc had in that area. Jerry spoke Spanish fluently. He lived by, "I'll never ask a man to do something I wouldn't do myself," which is critical in mining safety.

In July 1966, Jerry was thrown from a horse on the Faust ranch near Glenwood, NM, and hit his head on a rock. He was driven first to Silver City, then the several hundred miles to a hospital in El Paso, El Paso Co, TX. He died there the next day on 15 Jul 1966 and was buried in Memory Lane, Silver City, NM.

Jerry was the person after whom the filmmakers modeled their anti-hero in "*Salt of the Earth*" (1953), even to the point of his turning his pipe upside down when it was raining. This movie, filmed at his mine area, was about the labor and management strife, and is now considered a forerunner of women's rights. He was furious about it being filmed there and the mine's directors were able to prevent its being distributed for money; it could only be shown in non-commercial settings when no fees are collected. The movie was considered for remake in 2003. Jerry married Helen Elizabeth "Betty" BRAND on 10 Sep 1935 in EL Paso, El

Paso Co, TX and divorced Betty about Feb 1947.